



# HQ AETC News Clips

## Randolph AFB TX



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### Military personnel get surgery to enhance war readiness

**By Richard A. Marini**

San Antonio Express-News

**Web Posted : 01/05/2003 12:00 AM**

As the United States and Iraq tap-dance ever closer to war, the American military is preparing itself for the possibility, positioning personnel and matériel both here and abroad. In military hospitals in San Antonio and elsewhere, service men and women are undergoing a surgical procedure that promises to make them a more effective fighting force.

Under the Warfighter Refractive Eye Surgery Program, eligible Air Force personnel can undergo photorefractive keratectomy vision surgery, more commonly known as PRK. Operated in slightly different forms by both the Army and Navy, the program was begun in December 2001 and is designed to enhance military readiness by improving the eyesight of thousands of service personnel.

"We want to reduce dependence on eyeglasses and contact lenses in the military," explains Lt. Col. Robert E. Smith, a physician and chief of the cornea/refractive surgery service at Wilford Hall Medical Center.

Air Force Tech. Sgt. Steve Elliott had the surgery five months ago. It improved his vision from a "very nearsighted" 20/400 to an eagle-eyed 20/15.

His only complaint?

"I still find myself pushing my glasses up my nose," he says.

The voluntary program was launched because harsh fighting conditions and modern warfare technology make eyeglasses and contact lenses increasingly troublesome.

Elliott has been deployed four times in his military career. Each time the glasses he wore impeded his performance.

"In Kuwait, with the sand and the wind, they were one more thing to get messed up," he says. "In Korea, where it was cold, you'd walk inside where it's hot and your glasses would fog up."

More serious are the problems with high-tech gear such as chemical warfare masks and night-vision goggles.



**Ophthalmic tech Cherri Vorhees (left) gets Sgt. Emily Johnson to read the clock on the wall immediately after her photorefractive keratectomy surgery last month at Wilford Hall. Most of the surgeries on Air Force personnel are done at Wilford Hall, which is expanding its laser center.**

*Jerry Lara/Express-News*



**As it could be: Della Krinsky (from left), Johnson, Tech. Sgt. Rodric Eggleston and Senior Airman Kirk Johnson wait to undergo eye surgery. Priority categories are set up for those eligible for the surgery, though some higher-priority personnel aren't getting it because their commanders can't spare them for the four months it takes the eyes to heal.**

*S. A. Express-News*

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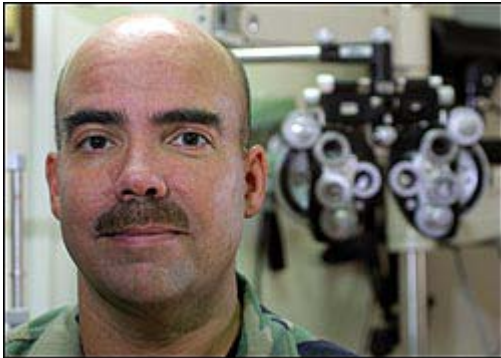
"We have special inserts so soldiers who wear glasses can use the gear, but it's one more thing to worry about and that can go wrong," says Smith.

Contact lenses aren't the answer, either. During Operation Desert Storm, for example, many soldiers were forced to abandon their contacts in favor of glasses.

Although PRK and Lasik (laser in-situ keratomileusis) eye surgery were long ago embraced by the general public, the military has, until recently, been hesitant to allow its personnel to undergo the procedures.

Having had the older radial keratotomy, or RK, vision correction surgery is still enough to disqualify an Air Force recruit.

The Air Force changed its mind about PRK laser eye surgery in part after Smith and several other researchers completed an exhaustive study that confirmed the safety and effectiveness of the procedure.



**Tech. Sgt. Steve Elliott says the PRK surgery is a boon to military effectiveness, citing his own past problems — when he wore glasses — with cold-weather fogging or blowing dirt.**

J. Michael Short/Special to the Express-News



**As it could be: Elliott underwent photorefractive keratectomy, or PRK, about five months ago.**

In addition to Wilford Hall, the Air Force is now doing refractive eye surgery at Travis AFB near San Francisco; Wright-Patterson AFB at Dayton, Ohio; Keesler AFB at Biloxi, Miss.; and the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Brooke Army Medical Center does not yet do laser eye surgery, according to a hospital spokesperson.

Wilford Hall is the hub of the Air Force's refractive eye surgery operations because it is where Air Force surgeons are trained in the procedure and where the most procedures are done. About 25 surgeons have completed training there and, since clinical trial procedures were first offered two years ago, more than 4,000 service personnel have undergone treatment, including Maj. Gen. Lee Rodgers, a physician and commander of the medical center.

Demand is so great, and the results so positive, that the laser center at Wilford Hall is being expanded. When construction is complete, the center will double its capacity to as many as 100 patients a day.

Although Army and Navy doctors do Lasik eye surgery on all but their aviators, the Air Force offers only what some say is the less-advanced PRK.

In PRK, a computer-controlled laser delicately shaves a thin layer of tissue from the cornea, which is the clear lens on the front of the eye. The now-reshaped cornea can better focus images onto the retina at the back of the eye.

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During Lasik surgery a small flap is first cut and removed from the cornea. After the inner tissue of the cornea is sculpted, the flap is folded back into place. Both PRK and Lasik take only minutes to complete.

Results from both procedures are similarly impressive. In studies, 80 percent of those undergoing PRK had 20/20 vision within a year. Between 83 percent and 85 percent of Lasik patients are 20/20 or better.

But while Lasik surgery has a shorter, less painful recovery, Air Force officials are concerned about the stability of the corneal flap created during the procedure.

"It never truly heals," explains Smith. "It's sealed in place by the epithelium (cells covering the front surface of the cornea). A finger to the eye could dislodge the flap."

Smith says that while studies have shown that changes in altitude and air pressure have no effect on the flap, there's still concern about G forces and wind blasts in the event, for example, a pilot ejects from an airplane.

David Harmon scoffs at this concern, saying the Air Force is being "ultra-conservative" in not offering Lasik surgery.

"There have been very few instances where the flap gets disturbed," says Harmon, president of Market Scope, a newsletter covering the refractive industry.

The Air Force places personnel who qualify for the surgery into one of four categories. At the top are the fliers. Next are those who need protective goggles to do their job, such as firefighters or those who work with explosives. Category three is made up of anyone on mobility status, meaning they can be deployed at any time. And fourth, at the bottom of the pyramid, is everyone else.

It has been estimated that 35 percent to 50 percent of service members need eyeglasses or contact lenses, although not everyone is eligible for laser surgery. Indeed, the Air Force's waiting list for the procedure is as short as two weeks at Wilford Hall, longer elsewhere. This is in part because members must get the approval of their commanding officer before they can have the procedure. Since full recovery takes four months, many commanders — concerned about the possibility of war with Iraq — are hesitant to release their personnel to have it.

This has opened slots allowing others in less-vital positions (such as Elliott, a category three) to undergo the procedure.

While the surgery is intended to make military personnel better fighters, it brings more personal benefits as well.



**Lt. Col. Della Krimsky undergoes the photorefractive keratectomy procedure, performed by Dr. Robert Smith.**

Jerry Lara/Express-News



**As it could be: Cherri Vorhees, an ophthalmic tech, prepares Krimsky for her eye surgery at Wilford Hall Medical Center. Wilford Hall is where the Air Force trains its surgeons in the procedure, in which a computer-guided laser trims a thin sheet of tissue off the cornea.**

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"When I look out the window, I can see all the way to the horizon," he says. "I never could see that far before. When I wake up, I can look at the clock and tell what time it is without first having to find my glasses. And I don't have to search for my glasses when I get out of the shower."



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### Year Ahead: Military

**By Sig Christenson**

Express-News Military Writer

**Web Posted : 01/05/2003 12:00 AM**

Dramatic change is in the wind for those in uniform around San Antonio as war in Iraq nears and U.S. Army South relocates to the Alamo City.

Thousands of American forces, including bombers, fighters, aircraft carriers and a hospital ship, got orders just after the Christmas holidays to begin converging on the Persian Gulf.

Closer to home, U.S. Army South mapped plans to start moving its staff and equipment from Puerto Rico to Fort Sam Houston.

When the move is completed this fall, 504 military and civilian workers for the command will be in place at Fort Sam, marking the first time a new command has moved to San Antonio since the 1988 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, or BRAC.

"We've had a lot of command restructuring," Fort Sam spokesman Phil Reidinger said. "But this is the first really new command that we've had locate on Fort Sam Houston, with the exception of the Ground Combat Training School, which moved from Fort Dix to Camp Bullis."

That was in 1988. Since then, San Antonio has scrambled to keep its missions and installations intact, nearly losing Brooks AFB and its thousands of research-based jobs. Historic Kelly AFB, often credited by local observers for helping create a Hispanic middle class in San Antonio, closed in 2001.

Keeping San Antonio's remaining installations and finding new missions for them has been high on the minds of local, state and congressional leaders, who fought hard to bring Army South to town. The command, which has ties with 32 countries, has a financial impact of \$160 million to \$200 million. It is expected to have its headquarters in the old Brooke Army Medical Center or the Beach Pavilion complex.

War, meantime, looms.

"My biggest job and most important job is to protect the security of the American people, and I am going to do that," President Bush said in Crawford on New Year's Eve. "And I had made the case and will continue to make the case that Saddam Hussein — a Saddam Hussein with weapons of mass destruction — is a threat to the security of the American people."

*S. A. Express-News*

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